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AUTHOR Harris, Maverick Marvin
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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was sent to English instructors in 134 Texas colleges and universities to ascertain their perceptions of entering freshmen's skills in written composition. The variables were type of institution, admission policy, enrollment, and teaching experience. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions of the number of entering freshmen who exhibited proficiency in each of 14 composition skills, including consideration of audience and purpose, organization, usage, and spelling and punctuation. The 105 responses indicated that students had a definite deficiency in all writing skills. The respondents indicated that on the average only about half of the freshmen were proficient in their strongest skills. For other skills, the ratings showed a steady decline. Finding and focusing on a personal subject was the area in which freshmen were rated most proficient, followed by construction of grammatical sentences, and spelling. Adapting tone and style to the occasion was the area of least proficiency. Schools with selective admissions ranked their freshmen higher on appropriate diction and correct pronoun agreement and reference. The type of institution, the enrollment, and the number of years of teaching experience had little bearing on teacher perception of freshman writing ability. (HTH)

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Texas English Teachers' Perception of Entering Freshmen's Writing Skills

Maverick Marvin Harris

East Texas Baptist College

For several years the profession has observed and the media have reported a decline in the writing skills of high school graduates. Data from testing services show a decline in test scores for writing during the 1970s. For example, in Texas the mean score on the English section of the ACT dropped from 17.3 for the fall of 1970 to 16.7 for the fall of 1980. Moreover, the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Texas Assessment Project[1] also indicate a decrease in compositional skills.

But though a decline in test scores is a matter of record, the standardized tests do not indicate the specific skills in which there has been a decrease in proficiency. The profession, therefore, has not known the particular writing skills to which it should address itself for remediation. Simply knowing that the patient is ill in some way does not aid the physician in determining the precise medicine to administer. If high school and college/university composition teachers were provided information on the writing strengths and weaknesses of entering freshmen, perhaps they could better structure writing instruction to capitalize on the strengths and to remedy the deficiencies.

Accordingly, during the 1980-1981 academic year a questionnaire was sent to the English departments in the 134 Texas colleges and universities to ascertain the college/university English teachers' perception of entering freshmen's skill in written composition. The instrument attempted to discover the writing strengths and weaknesses of entering freshmen as perceived by those directly involved in the teaching of composition.[2]

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Variables were (1) type of institution, i.e., public vs. private and 2-year vs. 4-year institution; (2) admission policy; (3) enrollment; and (4) teaching experience of the respondent. The return of questionnaires was gratifyingly high--105 total responses (78.4 percent), with 97 (73.1 percent) usable ones.

Each respondent was asked to indicate his/her perception of the number of entering college/university freshmen who exhibited proficiency in each of fourteen composition skills, using the following scale: 1 (none), 2 (some), 3 (half), 4 (most), 5 (all). Some of the skills are recognizably process oriented; some are product skills. The following fourteen skills were considered:

1. Consideration of purpose
2. Consideration of audience
3. Finding and focusing on a personal subject
4. Adapting tone and style to the occasion
5. Communication of logical ideas
6. Organization of the total composition
7. Paragraph development
8. Development of mature sentences
9. Construction of grammatical sentences
10. Appropriate diction
11. Usage
12. Agreement and pronoun reference
13. Spelling
14. Punctuation

For comparison purposes, responses from each group for each variable were averaged; then either a two-tailed T-test or an analysis of variance

was utilized to determine whether the mean responses for each group were significantly different. A significant difference was considered to be a value $\leq .05$.

The total responses (Table 1) demonstrate what is not news to writing teachers--that students have a definite deficiency in all writing skills. The highest mean response was 3.09, i.e., the respondents indicated that on the average only about half of the entering freshmen were proficient in their strongest skill. For the other skills, the ratings show a steady decline, signifying even less proficiency.

The skills in which entering freshmen were rated most proficient are, in descending order:

1. Finding and focusing on a personal subject, that is, one they can handle ($\overline{X} = 3.09$)
2. Construction of grammatical sentences ($\overline{X} = 3.07$)
3. Spelling ($\overline{X} = 2.95$)
4. Agreement and pronoun reference ($\overline{X} = 2.92$)
5. Paragraph development ($\overline{X} = 2.90$)

The skills in which entering freshmen were rated least proficient are, also in descending order:

10. Punctuation ($\overline{X} = 2.69$)
11. Communication of logical ideas ($\overline{X} = 2.68$)
12. Development of mature sentences ($\overline{X} = 2.66$)
13. Consideration of audience ($\overline{X} = 2.52$)
14. Adapting tone and style to the occasion ($\overline{X} = 2.43$)

It comes as no surprise to process-oriented teachers that the two lowest-ranked skills deal with process rather than product. Some will

likewise be surprised to note that spelling, agreement, and pronoun reference are among the students' strongest perceived abilities--even so it must be remembered teachers responded that only about half of the students demonstrated proficiency in these skills.

A look at the data on the variables reveals that, for the most part, teachers agree in their perception of students' compositional abilities, regardless of the type of institution, the admission policy of the school, the enrollment, or the experience of the teacher. Only occasionally are mean responses significantly different.

The type of institution has very little to do with teachers' perception of students' writing ability. Teachers in both public and private institutions alike reported that on the average only about half the entering freshmen had proficiency in the fourteen skills. The only exception was skill 4, adapting tone and style to the occasion. Teachers in private schools rated their students somewhat higher in this skill than did teachers in public schools. The difference in means ($\bar{X}$ of private = 2.71; $\bar{X}$ of public = 2.30) was significant at the .023 level. Further, there is no perceived difference for students in two-year colleges as opposed to those in four-year institutions.

Admission policy affected responses for only two skills. Teachers at schools with a selective admission policy ranked their students higher on the ability to use appropriate diction and the ability to employ correct agreement and pronoun reference. The means for use of appropriate diction were 2.72 for open admission and 3.08 for selective admission, which is significant at the .020 level. The means for skill in agreement and pronoun reference were 2.81 for open admission and 3.24 for selective

admission, which is significant at the .012 level. Responses from both groups were similar in regarding half or fewer of their students with proficiency in the other twelve skills.

The enrollment of an institution has no bearing on teacher perceptions. Students at small, medium-size, and large institutions were viewed as having comparable writing skills. Students at small schools, for example, were considered to have skills equal to those at large institutions, and vice-versa. Thus, teachers at each size institution do not rate their students any better or worse than those at any other size school.

Finally, the number of years of teaching experience also has little bearing on teacher perception of student ability. Newer teachers and older teachers view the abilities of their students alike. The only significantly different response was to skill 3. Teachers with ten or more years of teaching experience rated their students higher on the ability to find and focus on a subject that they can handle than did teachers with less than ten years instructional experience. The difference between the mean response for instructors with 1-9 years of experience (2.82) and the mean for teachers with 10 or more years of experience (3.20) was significant at the .033 level.

Teachers with ten or more years experience were asked to select from the list of skills a maximum of three skills in which they felt entering freshmen in 1980 were MORE proficient than entering freshmen a decade earlier. Then they were asked to list up to three skills in which they felt entering freshmen were LESS proficient than entering students ten years earlier. Moreover, respondents had the opportunity to indicate they observed neither an increase nor a decrease in skills.

Whereas 41 respondents (59.4 percent) indicated they saw no increase in students' writing skills during the decade of the 1970s, only 14 teachers (20.3 percent) responded that they perceived no decrease in proficiency. In addition, 7 respondents (10.1 percent) observed no change in proficiency--neither an increase nor a decrease in skills. The difference in the number of teachers who indicated an increase in proficiency and those who perceived a decrease in proficiency is noteworthy.

The top five skills in which some teachers perceived an increase over the ten-year period were organization of the total composition (17.4 percent), consideration of purpose (8.7 percent), consideration of audience (8.7 percent), construction of grammatical sentences (8.7 percent), and spelling (8.7 percent).

The six most frequently marked skills in which teachers felt there had been a decrease in proficiency were communication of logical ideas (29.0 percent), development of mature sentences (29.0 percent), construction of grammatical sentences (27.5 percent), spelling (27.5 percent), organization of the total composition (21.7 percent), and punctuation (21.7 percent). The much larger number of teachers who indicated a decrease in skills is worth noting. That three skills appear on both lists indicates an apparent disagreement among the respondents. The data give no hint of the cause of the disagreement.

Based on the responses to the survey, several observations may be made:

1. Teachers generally perceive that only about half of entering freshmen are proficient in each of the fourteen compositional skills.
2. Type of institution, admission policy, enrollment, and years of teaching experience of the respondent have little to do with teachers' perception of entering freshmen's writing skills.
3. Considerably more teachers believe that there was a decrease in skills during the decade of the 1970s than believe there was an increase in skills.

Teachers in public schools and colleges may utilize the findings of the survey to initiate remediation of certain perceived deficiencies in the compositional skills of students. Consequencly, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. That public schools increase emphasis upon composition in the curriculum
2. That high schools seek effective means--old and new alike--for increasing students' ability to communicate effectively in writing
3. That special attention be given at all levels of education to developing students' skill in punctuation, communication of logical ideas, development of mature sentences, consideration of the audience, and adapting tone and style to the occasion.
4. That school systems reduce class size and the course load of high school English teachers to allow for effective preparation, instruction, and grading of compositions.

The causes of students' low ability to write clearly, effectively, and correctly are myriad, difficult to isolate, and often beyond the ability of schools to remedy easily; yet if society values good writing, steps must be taken--and taken now--to provide curricular and instructional structures that will produce in students at all levels of education more effective communication skills than are presently observed.

ENDNOTES

[1]See Glenn Irvin, "The North East Texas Writing Project: Help for Composition Teachers," English in Texas (Spring 1981), 12:52-54.

[2]Although the method of seeking teachers' perceptions is not as precise as studies utilizing scores from tests of student writing, the procedure has been used before with satisfaction and is acceptable as a rough measure. Perceptions of expert respondents closely approximate reality. Some studies justifying this method are:

English, Fenwick W. and Roger A. Kaufman. Needs Assessment: A Focus for Curriculum Development. Washington, D.C.: ASCD, 1975. (See especially p. 39)

Rossi, Peter H., et al. Evaluation: A Systematic Approach. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979. (See Chapter 7: "Approximate Methods for Impact Assessment")

Worthen, Blaine R. and James R. Sanders. Educational Evaluation: Theory and Practice. Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones Publishing Company, 1973. (See p. 50f)

Cappadona, D. L. and D. Kerzner-Lipsky. "Prediction of School Mathematical Achievement from Motivation, Self-Concept, Teachers' Ratings and Ability Measures," School Science and Mathematics, pp. 140-144. (This study used, in part, teacher perception method)

Table 1

Total Responses to Items

N = 97

Skill	Response (in percentages)						Mean Rating	Rank
	5	4	3	2	1	NR		
1	1.0	28.9	25.8	41.2	2.1	1.0	2.85	7
2	2.1	12.4	26.8	51.5	6.2	1.0	2.52	13
3	1.0	33.0	39.2	23.7	1.0	2.1	3.09	1
4	---	14.4	21.6	56.7	7.2	---	2.43	14
5	---	11.3	44.3	43.3	---	1.0	2.68	11
6	---	13.4	47.4	38.1	1.0	---	2.73	9
7	1.0	13.4	59.8	25.8	---	---	2.90	5
8	---	10.3	43.4	44.3	---	---	2.66	12
9	1.0	25.8	52.6	20.6	---	---	3.07	2
10	---	13.4	55.7	29.9	1.0	---	2.81	8
11	---	19.6	48.5	30.9	---	---	2.87	6
12	---	24.7	42.3	33.0	---	---	2.92	4
13	---	25.8	43.3	30.9	---	---	2.95	3
14	---	9.3	50.5	40.2	---	---	2.69	10

Table 1-A

STUDENTS' PERCEIVED SKILLS

Skill	Rank
Finding and focusing on a personal subject	1
Construction of grammatical sentences	2
Spelling	3
Agreement and pronoun reference	4
Paragraph development	5
Usage	6
Consideration of purpose	7
Appropriate diction	8
Organization of the total composition	9
Punctuation	10
Communication of logical ideas	11
Development of mature sentences	12
Consideration of audience	13
Adapting tone and style to the occasion	14

Table 2

Type of Institution: Private vs. Public

(N: Private = 21, Public = 66)

Skill	Mean		T Value	Probability
	Private	Public		
1	3.10	2.74	1.83	.070
2	2.68	2.45	1.22	.225
3	3.17	3.06	0.58	.561
4	2.71	2.30	2.31	.023
5	2.84	2.60	1.64	.104
6	2.87	2.67	1.35	.181
7	3.00	2.85	1.07	.789
8	2.81	2.59	1.51	.134
9	3.19	3.02	1.15	.251
10	2.97	2.74	1.56	.121
11	3.00	2.83	1.09	.280
12	3.10	2.83	1.61	.111
13	2.97	2.93	0.17	.864
14	2.77	2.65	0.89	.378

Table 3

Type of Institution: 2-year vs. 4-year

(N: 2-yr. = 46, 4-yr. = 51)

Skill	Mean		T value	Probability
	2-yr	4-yr		
1	2.78	2.92	-0.77	.441
2	2.53	2.51	0.13	.896
3	3.09	3.10	-0.09	.929
4	2.39	2.47	-1.47	.640
5	2.64	2.71	-0.44	.658
6	2.67	2.78	-0.77	.441
7	2.85	2.94	-0.70	.485
8	2.63	2.69	-0.41	.679
9	3.09	3.06	0.19	.847
10	2.80	2.82	-0.14	.888
11	2.89	2.88	0.06	.951
12	2.83	3.00	-1.13	.262
13	2.96	2.94	0.10	.921
14	2.70	2.69	0.07	.943

Table 4

Admission Policy: Open vs. Selective

(N = 72 open; 25 selective)

Skill	Mean		T Value	Probability
	Open	Selective		
1	2.77	3.08	-1.46	.148
2	2.51	2.56	-0.26	.795
3	3.11	3.04	0.37	.714
4	2.36	2.64	-1.46	.143
5	2.65	2.76	-0.71	.477
6	2.67	2.92	-1.57	.120
7	2.85	3.04	-1.28	.205
8	2.63	2.76	-0.88	.381
9	3.00	3.78	-1.71	.090
10	2.72	3.08	-2.37	.020
11	2.82	3.08	-1.60	.112
12	2.81	3.24	-2.53	.012
13	2.90	3.08	-1.01	.315
14	2.67	2.76	-0.63	.530

Table 5

Enrollment

(N = A* = 40, B* = 40, C* = 17)

Skill	Mean			F Value	Significance
	A	B	C		
1	3.00	2.83	2.71	0.643	.533
2	2.54	2.67	2.14	1.938	.148
3	3.15	3.12	3.00	0.187	.829
4	2.59	2.40	2.29	0.891	.417
5	2.69	2.78	2.36	2.029	.135
6	2.78	2.78	2.53	0.861	.429
7	2.93	2.97	2.88	0.527	.598
8	2.65	2.67	2.65	0.013	.970
9	3.00	3.08	3.24	0.649	.530
10	2.80	2.83	2.82	0.016	.972
11	2.83	2.93	2.88	0.310	.738
12	2.83	2.97	3.00	0.507	.610
13	2.80	3.08	3.00	1.385	.254
14	2.58	2.85	2.59	2.197	.115

*

A = Less than 2,000 B = 2,000-10,000 C = Over 10,000

Table 6

Experience: 1-9 years vs. 10 or more years

(N: 1-9 yrs. = 28, 10 or more yrs. = 69)

Skill	Mean		T Value	Probability
	1-9 yrs	10 or more yrs		
1	2.79	2.88	-0.47	.637
2	2.67	2.46	1.03	.307
3	2.82	3.20	-2.16	.033
4	2.61	2.36	1.32	.188
5	2.61	2.71	-0.65	.516
6	2.61	2.78	-1.12	.265
7	2.79	2.94	-1.07	.288
8	2.57	2.70	-0.84	.403
9	3.00	3.10	-0.64	.527
10	2.75	2.84	-0.60	.547
11	2.75	2.94	-1.22	.226
12	2.86	2.94	-0.50	.620
13	2.93	2.96	-0.16	.870
14	2.54	2.75	-1.54	.126

TABLE 7

Perceived Increase in Skills, 1970-1980
(Top 5)

Skill	% Marking
Organization of the total composition	17.4
Consideration of purpose	8.7
Consideration of audience	8.7
Construction of grammatical sentences	8.7
Spelling	8.7

TABLE 8

Perceived Decrease in Skills, 1970-1980
(Top 6)

Skill	% Marking
Communication of logical ideas	29.0
Development of mature sentences	29.0
Construction of grammatical sentences	27.5
Spelling	27.5
Organization of the total composition	21.7
Punctuation	21.7